

**The Very Image of Life in its Eternal Truth**

Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* compared to Plato's *Ion* and *Republic*

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### Abstract

This thesis compares Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* with Plato's *Ion* and *Republic*, particularly examining how Shelley's theory of poetry is influenced by Plato. It is prima facie interesting that Shelley can borrow from Plato in an essay titled *A Defence of Poetry* because of Plato's notorious criticism of poetry. Furthermore, specifying how Shelley's and Plato's views compare may lead to a better understanding of the *Defence*. If one takes the *Defence* to contain Shelley's theory of poetry (as I do), grasping Shelley's stance may help in interpreting his oeuvre.

Shelley's *Defence* refers overtly to Plato regarding terminology, but there are important differences in content. Shelley believes poetry to have a much more beneficial role in society than Plato does. In fact, Plato argues imitative poetry to lead to moral corruption, whereas Shelley views poetry as an instrument to moral virtue. Furthermore, Shelley's poet possesses a combination of traits that Plato divides among his poet and philosopher. This is a crucial difference. For Plato, poets are inferior to philosophers because they are concerned with emotion (as opposed to reason). There is no such distinction between poets and philosophers in *A Defence of Poetry*. Shelley's poet is much more like a poet-philosopher.

Ultimately, Shelley values imagination above reason, whilst Plato values reason above all else. This is the fundamental difference between Shelley's theory of poetry and Plato's.

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## Introduction

In 1840, almost twenty years after Percy Bysshe Shelley's death, a collection of his letters and essays was published, edited by his wife, Mary Shelley. Among these was his apology for poetry, aptly titled *A Defence of Poetry*. This long essay, written shortly before his death in 1821, is a plea for poetry written in reaction to a combative text by his friend Thomas Peacock. However, instead of concerning himself with refuting Peacock's arguments, Shelley's postulates his own view of poetry. Thus, the *Defence* may be taken to contain Shelley's own theory of poetry. The essay might then be relevant in the interpretation of Shelley's poetry. Though critics are divided on whether such contextual information is useful for interpreting texts (cf. Roland Barthes' essay on the death of the author), I will not address that question here.

It is striking that Shelley's own view on poetry is permeated with direct and indirect references to Plato's discussions of poetry (which are generally unfavourable). Both the terminology and the content of Shelley's *Defence* remind one of Plato. Therefore, it makes eminent sense to read the *Defence* against the background of Plato's view on poetry. Additionally, studies by Ross G. Woodman and Ronald Tetreault suggest that Plato and ancient Greek poetry were of great interest to Shelley.

In a nutshell, this thesis will attempt to illuminate how Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* relates to Plato's *Ion* and *Republic*. I will endeavour to show how Plato shapes Shelley's theory of poetry by determining where Shelley agrees with Plato and where he does not. As I will be arguing, Shelley's perspective differs crucially from Plato; however, Shelley's Platonism (by which I mean: Shelley's own brand of Platonism, as we will see in chapter 2.4.) is undeniably relevant to interpreting the *Defence*.

Excellent literature exists on the subject of Shelley's Platonism, such as studies of the influence of the classics on Shelley by Eli Edward Burriss and an outstanding thesis on

Platonism in the *Defence* by Tracy Ware. James A. Notopoulos has written some essays interpreting Shelley with the aid of Platonic dialogues he was influenced by, such as the *Symposium* and the *Ion*. Though there is no shortage of discussions on instances of Platonism in Shelley's oeuvre, no papers have quite concerned themselves with discerning how Plato has shaped Shelley's perspective on poetry – except maybe Tracy Ware in “Shelley's Platonism in *A Defence of Poetry*,” published in 1983.

Since *A Defence of Poetry* is a lengthy text, I will concern myself only with sections that are relevant to our discussion. The excerpts examined in this paper are not exhaustive, and much more remains to be said on the topic. Furthermore, as Notopoulos and Ware have suggested, Shelley was familiar with multiple works of Plato; for brevity's sake, they are not all discussed in this thesis. Instead, I will be comparing the *Defence* to two works in particular, i.e. the short dialogue *Ion* and parts of the *Republic*. The rationale for choosing to limit myself to these two works is that Shelley mostly refers to either the *Ion* or book III and X of the *Republic* in his *Defence*. Plato's criticism of poetry in the *Republic* is generally considered to be his most elaborate discussion on the topic; therefore, it makes sense to direct my attention to this book. As for the *Ion*: this dialogue contains Plato's discussion of poetic inspiration. It seems sensible to include it in my discussion, because Shelley overtly refers to it in the *Defence* and in his letters. Though Notopoulos argues that Shelley also borrows from Plato's *Symposium*, I have excluded this dialogue from my discussion since it goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

The body of this paper is divided into four sections; the first two are summaries of relevant parts of *A Defence of Poetry* and the *Ion* and *Republic* respectively. The last two regard similarities and differences between the views of Shelley and Plato. This order of considering things seems most sensible, since a reader must first grasp the basic tenets of both Shelley's and Plato's theory of poetry before reaching an informed conclusion.

The question of how Shelley's view compares to Plato's is a particularly interesting one, because it is prima facie difficult to see why Shelley has borrowed from Plato. After all, Shelley's essay is a defence of poetry, whereas Plato famously banned poets from his ideal state in the *Republic*. It would make sense for Shelley to reject Plato outright, but instead, he often adapts Plato. It is arguably useful to be able to distinguish where Shelley argues against Plato and where he does not; we might find a pivotal argument that to help us interpret Shelley's *Defence*.

## Chapter 1: *A Defence of Poetry*

Shelley's *Defence* was published posthumously in 1840, although it was written in 1821, roughly a year before his death. The essay was a response to a polemical text from his friend Thomas Peacock, titled "The Four Ages of Poetry." Peacock's treatise stated, in short, that as society advances its scientific knowledge, poetry - which once shaped the intellect of man - loses its scholarly function and becomes a distraction at best (Mulvihill 131). Peacock recognises a historical cycle of growth and decline concerning poetry and he argues that poetry is currently in decline (Mahon 137). Though Shelley implies in the full title of *A Defence of Poetry* that the essay is comprised of remarks on an essay titled "The Four Ages of Poetry," his text does not overtly concern itself with rebutting Peacock's arguments. Instead, it appears that Shelley was inspired by Peacock to consider his own perspective on poetry.

The *Defence* begins with a consideration of imagination versus reason. Shelley states that the imagination makes use of the findings of reason and "colours them with its own light, and composing from them [...] other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity" (Shelley 1). Shelley thus depicts reason as an instrument to imagination: reason considers relations of things, but imagination considers the "forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself" (1). Poetry is then the expression of the imagination. Humans are capable of experiencing the things around them and can adequately put their apprehension of these things into words. Poets excel at phrasing their experiences: their "faculty for approximation to the beautiful" (Shelley 2) is extraordinary. What he means by 'beautiful' remains vague, but it is plausible to suppose that it refers to the beauty in nature – poets 'approximate' this beauty by wording it in an exceptionally accurate manner. Poets are capable of conveying the impressions that nature makes on their minds in a way that invites others to reduplicate them. As time goes on, these impressions come to stand for classes of thought – similar to idioms, or sayings. Then new poets must rise to renew with new words

the original impressions, as the language of poets unveils relations between things that were invisible before (or have become invisible, in this case). Shelley understands poetry to be cyclical: all great poets are part of the cycle of renewing apprehension of the conceptions that have become obscured by time. They are “episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world” (Shelley 10).

For Shelley, a poet in the universal sense is anyone with excessive imaginative talent; that includes prophets and philosophers. A poet is a kind of prophet: his conceptions apply to future generations, because he “participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one” (Shelley 4). Though Shelley, again, remains vague, it seems that this phrase refers to a poet’s written interpretation of the world, which is universally relevant and true. According to Shelley, language is a mirror of thoughts, and a more accurate representation of our internal lives than colour or form; this is why poetry is superior to any other art. Furthermore, Shelley asserts that the poet is not characterised by metre or rhyme, but by the imaginative way he puts his conceptions of the world into language – there is thus no clear-cut difference between prose and poetry. Notably, Shelley calls Plato “essentially a poet”: he praises the “splendour of his [Plato’s] imagery” and the “melody of his language” (4). Plato also fits Shelley’s description of a poet regarding the universal truth of his conceptions, since his works have survived the test of time. Conversely, he calls Shakespeare and Milton philosophers. Philosophers and poets alike teach the truth of things using images that have sprung from their minds. Poems show the unchangeable forms of human nature, the image of life expressed in eternal truth (Shelley 5).

After having defined poetry as such, Shelley proceeds to describe poetry’s societal role. Though poets have been accused of immorality (in particular by Plato), Shelley argues that the poetry’s way of improving mankind has been misunderstood. Poetry “lifts the veil off



the hidden beauty of the world,” thus showing the good and beautiful in actions and thoughts that otherwise would go unnoticed (Shelley 6). Poetry inspires one to imagine oneself in another’s shoes (or: to empathise with another), much like tragedies invite spectators to undergo catharsis by living through the characters. By exercising our empathic faculty, the circumference of the imagination is enlarged, leading to a better understanding of the world. Shelley claims that imagination is the instrument of moral improvement, though he does not specify how. It may be assumed that moral improvement is a result of empathising with others through poetry’s characters, which stimulate our imaginations. Though poetry can do a great deal of good in society by morally improving its citizens, poetry also exemplifies moral decay. According to Shelley, poetry and drama exhibit the vices of society when society is in decline (Shelley 6). Apparently, the imagination can be used to foster both moral improvement and moral decay. As poetry is a reflection of the imagination of poets, moral decay will trickle through poetry in a time of social decline – poets are children of their time, after all. This seemingly contradicts Shelley’s earlier statement that poets speak of universal truths, but I suggest that this may be interpreted as two co-existing properties of poets. Poets are then both spokesmen for truth about the world and subject to the vices of society.

Returning to the claim that poets constantly make us recognise eternal truths that we have forgotten to recognise, Shelley argues poetry to be cyclical. Every poet or poetical philosopher is an episode in a great poem. Ancient Greece blossomed because of poetry (or, Shelley concedes, the presence of poetry at least correlates with the rise of societies) (9). Later, ancient Rome flourished by imitating the Greek; then Christianity illuminated the subsequent ages (Shelley 10). Though Shelley is sceptical of the “evil” produced by followers of religions, he praises the idea of Christianity, calling Jesus’ thoughts the most vivid poetry (10, 11). Shelley asserts that each new system of thought has incorporated the poetry of the previous paradigm (11, 12). This is not to mean that poetry evolves with each new system, but

that poetry (which here appears to be synonymous with eternal truths) remains unchanging throughout the ages. This is the cyclical nature of poetry. The aforementioned great poem thus appears to be closely related to social change (12).

Lamenting that reasoners (i.e. scientists) have become more influential in society than poets, Shelley denies that reason is more useful than imagination, in line with his statement that reason is an instrument to imagination. He argues imagination to be of a more durable utility than reason, because those who know how to produce the highest pleasure – which is pleasure in pain - are poets and poetical philosophers (Shelley 14, 15). Shelley remains unclear on why pain brings us the highest pleasure; the notion of pleasure in pain is a common line of thought among the Romantics, which may be why Shelley felt he did not need to elaborate more. Shelley endorses his claim by stating that if none of the influential reasoners (such as Locke, Hume, and Voltaire) had existed, no moral improvement would have been lost - “a little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two” (Shelley 15). However, if none of the poets had ever existed, the moral condition of the world would be remarkably bleak. Shelley goes as far as to argue that the sciences would not exist without poetry, as there would have been no poetical philosophy to plant the seed for it (15).

“Poetry is the centre and circumference of knowledge” (16), but cannot be produced at will. Rather, inspiration is like a “fading coal” and an “inconstant wind” (16). Poetry is the vessel for inspiration (or: “visitations of the divinity in man” (17)). These visitations ultimately make the poet a better man, even in between inspired episodes. Poets must thus necessarily be the happiest and wisest of men (Shelley 18), though it remains unclear exactly how inspiration serves to make the poet a better man. It stands to reason that the universal truths that inspiration reveal become a guide that the poet lives by. Shelley ends his essay by noting that “poets are the unknown legislators of the world” (19), alluding to his earlier claims that poetry lies at the root of civilisation and that poetry is concerned with regurgitating truths

about the world.

*A Defence of Poetry* is fairly unstructured essay; Shelley repeats himself multiple times, e.g. concerning the cyclical nature of poetry. Many remarks are strewn throughout the text without adhering to a particular topic at hand. Shelley acknowledges this in his concluding commentary: “I thought it most favourable to the cause of my truth to set down these remarks according to the order in which they were suggested to my mind (...) instead of observing the formality of a polemical reply” (19). His imagery is at times clearly Platonic or reminiscent of Neoplatonism, on which I will elaborate in chapter three. In addition, Plato is mentioned a few times.

## Chapter 2: Plato on poetry

Since this thesis compares Shelley's *Defence* with Plato's works, it makes sense to discuss Plato's view of poetry. Because of the dialectic nature of Plato's works, it is difficult to grasp what Plato himself thought of poetry. It is, however, generally considered to be a good strategy to read Socrates as Plato's voice. Plato's silence regarding his own stance is likely due to the fact that he thought that truth should be reached through reasoning, not through mindless following of the person of the philosopher (Edelstein 20, 21). But since Plato also appears to regard Socrates as the wise spokesman for a higher truth (Edelstein, 20), it makes sense to equal Socrates' opinions to Plato's. Therefore, I will use 'Plato' and 'Socrates' interchangeably. I will be concerning myself only with the *Ion* and *Republic* books III and X, as these consider poetry most elaborately. Additionally, I have reason to suppose that Shelley was familiar with these particular texts, as will be discussed in chapter three.

The short dialogue *Ion* describes a debate between the rhapsode Ion (a rhapsode is a reciter of epic poems) and Socrates; the main theme is the nature of poetic inspiration. Ion's rhapsodist skills are limited to performing and understanding Homer's poetry. Socrates argues that Ion has no real skill, because he cannot grasp other poets as well as Homer, even when they have the same subject matter. Socrates asserts that Ion is instead an instrument of divine inspiration: "There is a divinity moving you" (Plato, *Ion* 5). This also applies for poets: "[...] there is no invention in him [the poet] until he has been inspired [...] and his mind is no longer in him" (Plato, *Ion* 5). Plato argues that poetry does not originate in man itself, but in the gods, who bestow inspiration on mankind – "the poets are merely the interpreters of the gods by whom they are severally possessed" (*Ion* 5). Plato thus understands poets to be interpreters of divine inspiration. Poets and rhapsodes exist on various "rings" around a magnet; the poet is the first link, actors and rhapsodes follow (Plato, *Ion* 5). Poets interpret the inspiration given to them, and rhapsodes and actors interpret the interpretations of poets.

These interpretations travel through the rings outward, becoming less and less accurate as they become interpretations of interpretations of interpretations. Rhapsodes are inspired the work they recite. Ion speaks “all these beautiful words about Homer unconsciously under his [Homer’s] inspiring influence” (Plato, *Ion* 13). Inspiration is not lost when it travels through the rings; despite not being inspired by the Gods himself, Ion acts as an instrument to inspiration by performing poetry.

Plato’s *Republic* has often been accused of contradicting other dialogues (such as the *Ion*) regarding its stance on poetry (Tate 16), particularly in the third and tenth book. In the *Ion*, Plato argues that poets are divinely inspired, leading one to believe that the Gods use poetry to speak to mankind - that seems to be a positive attribute. But in the *Republic*, Plato maintains that poets should be banned from the ideal state because of their corrupting influence on the youth. This is a curious contradiction. In book III of the *Republic*, Plato asserts that the guardians of the ideal republic should be educated in gymnastics and the liberal arts (Pappas 64; Plato 239). These liberal arts include theatre, music and poetry – the latter is discussed in detail. Socrates forbids the young guardians to consume poetry in which the gods do evil or in which good men are weak, because those characters must not serve as role models for them (Pappas 65). Plato apparently believes poetry to have a strong educational power.

Socrates describes various forms of poetry: simple narrative (where the poet speaks as himself), narrative by imitation (where the poet speaks through characters), or a combination of the two, such as epic poetry (Tate 17). The notion of imitation (mimesis) is crucial in Plato’s view on poetry (Tate 16; Pappas 67), for it is the imitative poetry that Socrates wants to ban from the republic. Imitative poetry urges readers to sympathise and identify with evil or weak characters, which in turn leads to moral corruption. Plato’s argument against imitative poetry rests on two assumptions: he appears to suggest that imitating imitative

poetry is a necessary result of consuming such poetry and that imitating ‘bad’ examples will often lead to a bad character (Tate 17). Considering these assumptions, it makes eminent sense that he would forbid the guardians to read poetry that is not conducive to morally upstanding behaviour: “We would not have our guardians grow up amid images of moral deformity [...] until they silently gather a festering mass of corruption in their own soul” (Plato, *Republic* 256).

Wise men will not blindly sympathise with (i.e. imitate) corrupt poetry like baser men do (Tate 17, 18). They will only imitate those characters that are virtuous, and baser characters only for amusement (Tate 17; Plato, *Republic* 251). The virtuous poet will employ the simple narrative style where possible, so as not to imitate bad characters in his writing – at most, he will use the mixed style, with as much simple narration as possible (Plato, *Republic* 251). Because not all citizens of the republic are wise (they will “be ready to imitate anything” (*Republic* 251)), Plato advocates for a censure on poetry: “Are poets required by us to express the image of good in their works, on pain, if they do anything else, of expulsion from our State?” (*Republic* 256). The answer to this question is affirmative. The only poets that are allowed are “those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and the graceful” (Plato, *Republic* 256, 257).

Though Plato banned imitative poetry in book III, he returns to discuss it in more detail in book X of the *Republic*. According to Tate, book X should be read as a supplementary to III (19). In *Republic* book X, Plato compares painters to poets. A painter is thrice-removed from the ideal form of the object he paints, since he can only paint appearances (i.e. he paints not the ideal form of a bed, but the particular bed a carpenter has made). It follows that a painter does not know what he is representing (Plato, *Republic* 464, 465). Only those who actually use (as opposed to merely paint) a particular object will know its ideal form (Plato, *Republic* 464, 465). Knowledge gained from using an object is once-

removed from the ideal form and thus closer to it. Imitative poets are similar to painters in that they represent appearances only (Plato, *Republic* 467). They are, like painters, thrice-removed from the truth. Furthermore, imitative poetry appeals to an inferior part of the soul, i.e. the part which concerns itself with unbridled emotions as opposed to superior reason (Plato, *Republic* 469).

The imitative poet, like the painter, does not know anything of the true forms of life, but instead portrays easily imitated emotion. For Plato, emotions are the appearances of life. Like a painting of a bed is far removed from ideal form of a bed, so emotions are far removed from the ideal of morally virtuous behaviour. Wise men are led by reason, not emotions; they are not content with appearances of behaviour (emotions) but instead seek to practice the ideal form of behaviour (the morally virtuous life). But the imitative poet does not intend to “please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he prefers the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated” (Plato, *Republic* 469). Though we are enraptured by the sorrow and weeping of characters in Homer’s poetry, we frown when we meet a man actually grieving in this way (Plato, *Republic* 470). It is good to inhibit our emotions by reason or habit, but imitative poetry urges us to bask in them. People assume it to be harmless to sympathise with poetry’s characters because it concerns another’s actions, but “few persons ever reflect [...] that from the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves” (Plato, *Republic* 470). From this then follows that imitative poetry misleads because it is not concerned with the true morally virtuous life and urges readers to forgo restraining their emotions.

Though Plato does not discuss it in the *Republic*, it seems plausible that there are also poets that are not imitators. These poets must be inspired by the ideal forms themselves, like the divinely inspired poet in the *Ion*. They must be familiar with what they are writing about (the morally virtuous life) for them to not be imitators - this is a key point. They must use a

narrative style with little imitation (Plato, *Republic* 250). Such poets are very much like our general definition of a philosophers. Like philosophers, good poets must exert their reasoning faculty to apprehend the intangible ideals before them. Furthermore, both philosophers and the hypothetical good poets seek the morally virtuous life. It is therefore remarkable that Plato speaks of “an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (471), since the hypothetical good poet and philosopher do not appear to be at odds with each other. However, poets that are not imitators do not exist for Plato due to the nature of poetry, as we will discuss in the following chapters.



### Chapter 3: Where *A Defence of Poetry* borrows from Plato

Before we subject the *Defence* to any investigation, we must determine what Shelley reasonably could have known of Plato. It is certain that Shelley received an education in the classics, as was usual in his days (Burriss 344; Tetreault 18). However, Plato was not part of university curriculums (Quinney, 412). Around the time Shelley wrote the *Defence*, he was reading Plato's *Ion*. He wrote about in a letter to Thomas Peacock, explaining why his answer to "The Four Ages of Poetry" was late (Notopoulos 98, 99). In another letter Shelley mentioned having translated the *Ion*, the *Symposium* and parts of the *Phaedon* (Notopoulos 99). Furthermore, he was familiar with many of the Greek tragedians and Greek drama in general (Burriss 348). "Shelley's bosom interest was Greek literature – the dramatists and Plato, especially – and he had all the passion of the evangelist in his desire to show his find to others," according to Burriss (354). Tetreault states that Shelley likely possessed a 1534 or 1556 folio Plato in Greek (19). This means that he probably interpreted the Greek himself, not heavily relying on Latin translations. The fact that Shelley wrote in a letter that great authors are "undelightful and uninstrucive in translation" makes a stronger case for this assumption (Burriss 345).

Woodman argues that Shelley's relation to Plato consists of "three fairly distinct phases" during his lifetime (497). The first phase, between 1810 and 1812, was one of dismissal, as Shelley was at that time convinced that it was science – not poetry – that had the power to reveal the "immutable order of the universe" (Woodman 497). During the second phase, from 1812 onwards, Shelley became increasingly interested in ancient Greek mythology (Woodman 497). In this second phase, he became convinced that all of classical literature could be interpreted as "a single cyclic poem" about humanity and human life, which inspired his own philosophy (Woodman 497). He now considered Plato a "mythopoeic" (μυθοποιία: myth-making) poet. Plato's incorporation of Greek myths in his

dialogues dialogues served as a model for Shelley's own poetic vision (Woodman 497). This poetic vision consisted of introducing into his poetry the Orphic truths about the human condition (Woodman 497), truths he found in Plato. The third phase spans the last two years of his life. Shelley studied the role of myths in Plato's philosophy - particularly the "rejection of myth-makers" (Woodman, 497, 498), which refers to the rejection of imitative poetry in books III and X of the *Republic*. This topic was of particular interest to Shelley because he was writing a defence of imitative poetry at that time – *A Defence of Poetry*.

Many of Shelley's peers, like Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, shared his interest in Greek mythology. According to Quinney, the interest of the British Romantics in Greek literature in general and Plato in particular was part of their reaction to the Enlightenment of the previous century (413). The Romantics opposed the Enlightenment's focus on reason and science and instead sought to find truth and beauty in emotions and imagination, for which they found an advocate in Plato. This is puzzling, since Plato fiercely defended reason as superior to emotions (as we have seen in the previous chapter).

Since the *Defence* was written at the time that Shelley concerned himself with Plato's rejection of imitative poetry (Woodman 497), the essay contains many references to Plato's theory of poetry. These allusions are found both terminology and content - I will be concerning myself with both. When discussing terminology, I will sometimes be referring to Platonic concepts that have not been reviewed in the previous chapter; these examples strengthen the case for Plato's general influence on Shelley.

Shelley borrows several phrases from Plato. Notably, Shelley describes a poet as someone who "apprehends the true and the beautiful," which is a phrase that is frequently used by Plato, e.g. in *Republic* book III when discussing the right style for poetry (*Republic* 251, 257, 258). Shelley also appears to take the word "good" (Shelley 2) to connote truth and beauty, which is in line with Plato's Form of the Good, from which all other Forms flow

(Santas 5). Shelley's descriptions of poetry ("images which participate in the life of truth") and poems ("the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth") are similar to Plato's discussion of poetry in *Republic* III and X, particularly where it pertains the idea of poetry as an image (Shelley 4). On morality, Shelley writes: "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively" (Shelley 6), which might refer to the selective imitation (i.e. imagining himself in the place of another) the good man practices in *Republic* book III (Plato 251). On the other hand, Plato believed only reason to be conducive to morally virtuous behaviour.

Shelley's references to Plato's *Ion* are significantly more overt than those to the *Republic*. Shelley speaks of "the sacred links of that [poetry's] chain" that have "never been entirely disjointed, which descending through the minds of many men is [sic] attached to those great minds, whence as from a magnet the invisible effluence is sent forth" (9). This bears a striking resemblance to Plato's account of divine inspiration in the *Ion* (Plato 5). Another reference to the *Ion* is the phrase "inspired rhapsodist" (Shelley 10), as well as the assertion that poetical inspiration is like an "inconstant wind" and an "invisible influence" (Shelley 16). The last quote fits Plato's claim that poets are "powerless and unable to utter their oracles" when they are not inspired (Plato, *Ion* 5). Good poetry is as the "first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially" (Shelley 14), which is parallel to Plato's well-known conception of ideal Forms and their particular manifestations. The poet "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one" (Shelley 3), which is reminiscent of Plotinus' conception of the One. Plotinus in turn derived this from Plato's *Parmenides* (Dodds 134), a dialogue on the theory of Forms. This suggests that Shelley was also influenced by Neoplatonist interpretations of Plato. Neoplatonism falls outside the scope of this thesis, so I will not be discussing it here.

Undoubtedly, there are much more instances of Platonic terminology to be found in A

*Defence of Poetry*, but the above instances suffice to show that there are many. It cannot be denied that Shelley was familiar with Plato. It is, for example, obvious that he read the *Ion*, which is supported by Notopoulos (98, 99). When it comes to content, Shelley agrees with aspects of Plato's perspective on poetry. Note that I employ the word 'aspects,' because Shelley departs from Plato's theory of poetry in several ways. I will be considering these divergences from Plato in greater detail in the next chapter; for now, I will only briefly mention them.

One of the most striking similarities between Shelley and Plato is their shared recognition of the morally educational influence of poetry. Plato's view is that imitative poetry may be employed to teach children (*Republic* 252), but the wise man must not let himself be educated by imitations (*Republic* 250, 251). Plato argues that imitative poetry teaches mostly morally corrupt behaviour, and that using poetry as a learning aid is thus ill-advised. Plato recognises that poetry plays an important role in the acquisition of behaviour, but, for him, poetry perpetuates vices far more than it does virtues. This is why he asserts in *Republic* book III: "...we must assume control over the narrators of this class of tales [of the gods] [...] and beg them not simply to revile but rather to commend the world below, intimating to them that their descriptions [imitative poems] are untrue, and will do harm to our future warriors" (Plato 239). Shelley, on the other hand, views poetry as a moral educational device *pur sang*: "Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man" (6), and "the great instrument of moral good is the imagination; [...] poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause" (6). He writes about those who read Homer: "... nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector and Ulysses" (Shelley 5). Great poetry invites the reader to admire, "until from admiring he imitates, and from imitation he identifies himself with the objects of his admiration [Homer's characters]" (Shelley 5). Apparently, good poetry elicits a

desire in its readers to imitate its characters. This may learn readers to know and practice “friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to an object,” of which they see examples in poetry (Shelley 5). Note that though both Shelley and Plato acknowledge that poetry has influence on moral education, Shelley is much more optimistic about employing poetry to that end. This crucial difference will be addressed in the following chapter.

A second parallel between Shelley and Plato is the assumption that poetic inspiration cannot be willed. Plato’s *Ion*, which concerns itself with poetic inspiration, states: “[...] the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles” (Plato 5). Shelley agrees with Plato that poetry is not written at will – “a man cannot say: ‘I will compose poetry’” (16) – but that inspiration is fickle and inconstant – “the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence [...] awakens to transitory brightness” (16). But whereas Plato’s poet receives inspiration from the gods outside him (Plato, *Ion* 5), Shelley’s poet finds this inspiration in himself: “this power arises from within” (Shelley 16). Shelley speaks of the “instinct and intuition of the poetical faculty” as the origin of inspiration (17). “Both [Plato and Shelley] perceive the poet as an agent of divinity, the location of which is within the psyche for Shelley,” according to Ware (544). Another notable difference between Shelley and Plato is the fact that Shelley interprets poetry as “the centre and circumference of knowledge” (Shelley 16), whilst Plato associates knowledge with reason only (Plato, *Republic* 461). For Plato, poetry is concerned with impressions (i.e. appearances), and “truth is not reached by impression unless the impression is examined and confirmed by reason” (Shearer Duncan 488). On a higher level, this means that Plato’s poet and philosopher will forever be at odds with each other – this is the “ancient quarrel of poetry and philosophy” (*Republic* 471). For Shelley, this distinction is non-existent, as we will see in the next chapter – “Plato

was essentially a poet” and “Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton [...] are philosophers of the very loftiest power” (4).

A third similarity is the idea that a good poet truly knows what moral virtue is. *Prima facie*, this appears to contradict Plato’s stance that poets cannot be morally virtuous because they are not concerned with the true forms. However, I argue that Shelley’s poet is a mixture of Plato’s poet and Plato’s philosopher and thus, that there is a parallel to Plato. Plato rejects the claim that “poets know what moral excellence is” and asserts that a poet cannot possibly know what true moral goodness is, since if he did, he would not concern himself with the imitation of appearances (Gulley 155). He would instead live according to his insights and set an example – “he would be a philosopher, not a poet” (Gulley 156). For Shelley, the figure of the poet and the philosopher are not mutually exclusive. Shelley’s poet possesses better qualities that Plato ascribes to his philosopher: “Poets are [...] spirits of the most refined organisation” who produce “the interpretation of a diviner nature through our own,” which refers to poetry (Shelley 17). The moments of inspiration that befall a poet make him a better man: “The frequent recurrence of the poetical power [...] may produce in the mind a habit of order and harmony correlative with its own nature and with its effects upon other minds” (Shelley 18). Though a poet may fall in moral corruption, he will wholeheartedly try to avoid this (Shelley 18). Shelley’s poet is thus an amalgamation of Plato’s poet (in that he is concerned with imagination instead of reason) and Plato’s philosopher (in that he truly knows moral virtue). It is interesting to note that Plato circumvents the antagonism of poet and philosopher by being a poetical philosopher himself (Shearer Duncan 484). It is not so much Plato’s discourse, but rather Plato’s person that Shelley models his figure of the poet after. Shelley’s notion of the poet as a man with true knowledge of morality is modelled fits Plato, the philosopher-poet. A more exhaustive discussion of this crucial point will follow in the next chapter.

As the discussion above shows, Shelley borrows from Plato in various ways, both in terminology and content. There are also prominent differences – the most important being that Shelley is, in general, much more favourable about the figure of the poet and the influence of poetry on society than Plato is. The following chapter will examine these differences in more detail.

#### Chapter 4: Where *A Defence of Poetry* differs from Plato

After having asserted where Shelley borrows from Plato in the previous chapter, it has become clear that there are a few important differences between their respective views on poetry. One of the most striking differences that concerns the role of poetry in society. Another crucial difference pertains to the figure of the poet. Both will be discussed in this chapter.

Both Shelley and Plato recognise poetry's significant influence on society. Shelley has made this abundantly clear, considering the fact that *A Defence of Poetry* is a plea dedicated to the beneficial moral influence of poetry on society. Though Plato acknowledges that poetry has educational qualities, he believes its moral influence to be detrimental to society (*Republic* 239, 250). Plato and Shelley are thus divided on the desirability of poetry's influence on society. Plato views poetry - imitative poetry at least - as morally corrupting and consequently wants it banned from the ideal state (*Republic* 471).

Shelley, on the other hand, thinks poetry to be constitutive to the rise of great societies: "The drama at Athens [...] ever coexisted with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age" (Shelley 8). At the start of a new society, "every author is necessarily a poet" and poet are the "institutors of laws and founders of civil society" (Shelley 2). Shelley infers a causal relationship between poetry and society from their coexistence, for which there is no further evidence given. Shelley appears to recognise this fallacy and argues: "We know no more of cause and effect than a constant conjunction of events: poetry is ever found to coexist with whatever other arts contribute to the happiness and perfection of man" (7).

Shelley's argument for the beneficial moral influence of poetry (contra Plato) states that poetry contributes to the moral improvement of man by strengthening the "faculty which is the organ of moral nature of man" (Shelley 6). This faculty is the imagination. "The secret of morals," says Shelley, is "an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in



thought, action, or person, not our own” (6). Chernaik states: “The great defence Shelley makes of poetry is that it counters egoism, the surrender to ourselves and our time” (583), enabling us to empathise with the other. Empathising with the other through imitation (i.e. imagination, i.e. identification) is then the way in which poetry acts to morally improve mankind. Shelley remains vague about the specific manner in which imitating others leads to moral improvement; he is also silent about the imitating of morally corrupt characters, a key point in Plato’s criticism. But, despite this, Shelley’s stance is clearly an opposition of Plato’s view that poetry will morally corrupt mankind because it appeals to the “fitful temper” instead of the rational side of man (Plato, *Republic* 469).

Ultimately, it is the favourable notion of imitative poetry that separates Shelley from Plato. Almost everything about imitative poetry that Plato condemns, Shelley values highly. Examples are poetry’s appeal to emotion and its preoccupation with appearances. For Shelley, it is exactly the appeal to emotion that makes imitative poetry invite identification with its characters. This identification, as we have seen, in turn leads to moral improvement its readers. Furthermore, Poetry “lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world” (6) and expresses life “in its eternal truth” (4). Shelley believes at least some truth on the human condition can be retrieved from poetry (cf. Gulley 157), though poets may ascribe “the vices of their contemporaries” to their characters, which makes finding this truth difficult (Shelley 5).

As has been shown, Shelley’s stance on imitative poetry and its role in society is much more favourable than Plato’s. In the *Defence*, Shelley addresses this stark difference himself: “The whole objection [...] of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man” (6), which can be read as an unambiguous critique of Plato. Shelley does not explicitly acknowledge the second fundamental difference between himself and Plato, regarding the figure of the poet. Shelley’s

conception of the poet has been discussed briefly in the previous chapter and I will be considering it in more detail here.

As noted earlier, Shelley attributes to his conception of a poet many traits that Plato assigns to a philosopher only. In short, Shelley's poet is an amalgamation of Plato's poet and philosopher. Whereas Plato proposes a clear distinction between the two, Shelley does not (Plato, *Republic* 470; Shelley 2, 4).

Plato's view is shaped by the assumption that poets, contrary to philosophers, do not know what they represent because they imitate only appearances of things (*Republic* 465). Philosophers and virtuous men are not swayed by those superficial appeals to emotion (Plato, *Republic* 250). They live according to "the better part of the soul" which "trusts to measure and calculation," which results in acquiring true knowledge about the world (Plato, *Republic* 466). Plato makes a crucial distinction between those ruled by emotions (poets) and those ruled by rational deliberation (philosophers). Humans possess both emotion and reason: "When a man is drawn in two opposite directions [...] this necessarily implies two distinct principles in him" (Plato, *Republic* 468). A philosopher chooses to be guided by intellect, but the poet allows himself to be fooled by the appearance of virtuous behaviour (Plato, *Republic* 469). Plato's disdain for poets is a logical consequence of his stance that "the higher principle is [...] to follow this suggestion of reason" (*Republic* 468). Poets refuse to do this, and choose to concern themselves with the imitation of seemingly virtuous characters. A 'wise poet' is a *contradictio in terminis* for Plato, because if a poet truly understood the good life, he would not dare involve himself with imitation. He would live according to his acquired knowledge and be a philosopher (Gulley 155). Plato ultimately settles this quarrel between poetry and philosophy in favour of philosophy, banning poetry from his ideal state (Gulley 168).

Shelley also recognises that humans experience two kinds of mental actions: reason

and imagination (Shelley 1). These are akin to Plato's distinction of reason and emotion. But Shelley crucially values imagination above reason – “reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent” (1). It is imagination that allows us to live morally just lives (Shelley 6) and it is imagination that guides us to true knowledge about the world (Shelley 16). In fact, Shelley explicitly rejects the idea that imagination is subordinate to reason by stating that imagination is far more useful in attaining “pleasure in its highest sense” (14, 15). This highest pleasure remains somewhat vague, but Shelley adheres to the Romantic idea that there is great pleasure in pain: “Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expressions of the approximation to the highest good” (15). Poetry elicits those expressions, which is why poetry is superior to reason, which cannot produce them (Shelley 16). Those who produce of this highest form of pleasure are “poets or poetical philosophers” (Shelley, 15). This last phrase can be interpreted to mean that for Shelley, great poets are always philosophers, but philosophers are not always poets. Poets are, like philosophers or “reasoners” (Shelley 15), concerned with gathering true knowledge about the world (2). They do so in a way that produces the highest pleasure (Shelley 15). In this way, they are also philosophers. Reasoners have increasingly tried to replace the role of the imagination with reason. Shelley points them to their rightful place in stating that their exertions should be confined to the scope of reason. They should not be attempting to “destroy [...] the eternal truths charactered upon the imaginations of men” (Shelley 14). This is why, for Shelley, not all philosophers are poets; only those who respect the eternal truths of the great cyclic poem are.

This remarkable difference in value ascribed to imagination (i.e. emotion) lies at the root of Shelley's and Plato's perspective on the figure of the poet. For Plato, the poet neglects to employ his highest faculty by appealing to emotion. For Shelley, the poet produces the highest pleasure by appealing to the imagination. It is troublesome to find out whether Shelley

means the same by 'imagination' as Plato does by 'emotion,' but it seems that they are both antithetical to reason.

Plato values poetry that appeals to emotion low because emotion is easily imitated, which is problematic since a wise man should not imitate, but find truth through reason (*Republic* 250). Shelley, on the other hand, values poetry that appeals to emotion highly because it invites one to imitate morally virtuous behaviour (6). In a nutshell, imitation is a bad quality for Plato, but a good one for Shelley. It is this, then, that marks Shelley's greatest departure from Plato.

## Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to determine how Shelley's theory of poetry as posited in *A Defence of Poetry* compares to Plato's discussion of poetry in the *Ion* and book III and X of the *Republic*. After having summarised the relevant parts of the Defence and Plato's works, I have shown that Shelley's terminology is at times remarkably reminiscent of Plato. It is clear, for example, that Shelley was influenced by Plato's *Ion* when discussing poetic inspiration. Furthermore, Shelley and Plato both recognise the educational aspect of poetry, as well as the idea that poetic inspiration cannot be called upon at will. As we have seen, both Shelley and Plato grant that a good poet is necessarily a man who is morally virtuous. Note that for Plato, a good poet cannot be one that writes imitative poetry, whilst Shelley has no such restriction.

A significant difference is how highly Shelley values the educational qualities of poetry compared to Plato. Shelley believes poetry to play a central role in the moral improvement of man, since to empathise is to be moral. Though Shelley remains vague about the precise way in which imagining oneself in another's shoes leads to moral betterment, the upshot of his evaluation of poetry is overwhelmingly positive. Plato, on the other hand, is much more cynical about the moral influence of poetry. His argument for banning imitative poetry from the ideal state hinges on the accusation that imitative poetry is concerned with appearances of things. Because of this, imitative poetry cannot lead one to truth about the world. Furthermore, since imitative poetry appeals to the emotional part of the soul, it is easily imitated by readers, finally leading to ignorance and moral decay.

The figure of the poet is fundamentally different for Shelley and Plato. Shelley ascribes traits to his poet that Plato believes to be inherent to philosophers. Shelley's poet is a philosopher-poet. Shelley's poet (or philosopher-poet) has true knowledge of the world. This is not the case for Plato, who attributes true knowledge only to the philosopher. I have argued that 'imagination' and 'emotion' have different connotations, but are both antithetical to

reason. As stated before, Shelley believes imitation to be the path to moral improvement, brought upon readers by the poet-philosopher, whilst Plato thinks imitation to lead to moral decay, brought upon the reader by poet. These perspectives are clearly conflicting.

Shelley appears to be aware of this final disagreement about the status of imitation. Though he lauds Plato for being a philosopher-poet, he sharply separates from Plato's criticism concerning imitation. His departure from Plato might be the result of his Romanticism, which placed imagination above reason - this was always fundamentally irreconcilable with Plato's preference for reason. But despite this unavoidable difference (and maybe thanks to his relatively broad definition of 'poet') Plato formed an inspiration for his *Defence*. This is made clear by his letters, many of which speak Plato's praise, and the fact that his own theory of poetry is so obviously influenced by Plato. And importantly: though Plato rejects imitative styles, his own dialogues are almost exclusively imitative. This creates way for Shelley to cling to Plato whilst having the aforementioned dispute on imitation - Shelley takes Plato's person as an inspiration, not strictly Plato's works. Plato settled the ancient quarrel of poetry and quality himself, after all. This is perfectly in line with Shelley's equation of the philosopher and the poet.

I maintain that grasping Shelley's own distinct flavour of Platonism is essential to understanding his view on poetry. One could argue that Shelley is not a Platonist because his perception of imitation is so radically different from Plato's. I, on the other hand, suggest that Shelley is indeed a Platonist. At the very least, he thought highly of Plato. But, more importantly, he did take Plato as an inspiration. *A Defence of Poetry* pays tribute to Plato's person. It is true that Shelley rejected part of Plato's criticism of poetry and directly opposed him, but in another way, he followed Plato very closely.

As I have argued, the *Defence* may be taken to express Shelley's own theory of poetry; by extension, it may then be useful in interpreting his poetic oeuvre. I maintain that though

Shelley appears to depart from Plato, he may be argued to adapt Plato.

Of course, this essay is not complete; the next step might be to compare Plato's *Symposium* to Shelley's notion of love as a moral instrument, as Notopoulos has suggested. This exemplifies that *A Defence of Poetry* is a complex text, and that there is much more to investigate outside the scope of this thesis.

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